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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses five issues in consideration of family contributions to teachers' work and students' success. The five issues include change, partnerships, students' learning, value systems, and international networking. A review of studies and programs illustrates implications for policy and practice for teachers' professional development. Teachers are urged to have a proactive view of change and the influence of change on education, to study and initiate partnerships which enhance students' learning, to clarify parental contributions to students' learning and to share intellectual authority, to learn what values are held by parents and students and publicize the values underpinning curriculum, and to be catalysts for networking which keeps them abreast of educational advancement. (Contains 34 references.) (JDD)

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THE HOME SCHOOL CONNECTION

EMPOWERING THE PROFESSIONAL

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Maureen Michael, St. Andrew's College, Glasgow

Paper presented Australian Teacher Education Conference Brisbane, 3-6 July, 1994.

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THE HOME SCHOOL CONNECTION

EMPOWERING THE PROFESSIONAL

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In the International Year of Family what better time in history than to place emphases on the contribution made to teachers' work and students' success by families. This does not mean that restrictions, difficulties and indeed negative bias against active participation do not exist; indeed they do. However, in this paper five issues are addressed - change, partnership, students' learning, value systems and international networking. When these are successfully interwoven it is argued that empowerment of teachers can be claimed. Case studies are drawn upon to clarify directions which have implications for policy and practice for teachers' professional development.

CHANGE

Schools are key institutions through which individuals and social aspirations are constructed and consequently are prime targets for the process of reform (Bates, 1993:1). Indeed schools are operating in an unstable society where social purposes of the nation are traduced, public assets stripped, public institutions gutted and the struggle towards democracy betrayed Bates (1993:1). Presently it is a society wherein the middle class is farewelled as technology revolutionalises communication and service industries (Bates, 1993:3).

Schools are experiencing major structural controls, two in particular - one of the curricular nature, the other evaluative (Bates, 1993:7). In regard to the curricular control there is emphasis on topics, levels and competencies which can be seen as rather inflexible and counter to differentiation on a multicultural society (Bates, 1993:7). Curriculum as presented is seen as related to the world of work. Curriculum control has been evident in debates, for example, within the Finn, Mayer and Carmichael reports. The evaluative control is highlighted by the lists of targets which are described in numerical and percentage terms. Even the DEET Discussion Paper on Teacher Education indicated professional interest and commitment as perhaps secondary to managerial control (Bates,1992 d). This time of reform has also been described as not about teachers knowledge and dedication and their concern for children but about control by market forces (Snook,1992:7). If this is so then the major effect is a reproduction of social class and ethnic advantages and disadvantages (Ball,1992:2 as cited by Bates,1994).

It is within this battle for position and control that education must focus on the promotion of a caring, just, morally responsible, compassionate and ecologically aware society (Campbell,1992:9). Bates says there is need to fight for an education that recognises its social role and for politics to have social objectives and imperatives (Bates,1994:10). Wheelwright(1992:47) emphasises the need for satisfaction, happiness and human development to be the emphases. It is at this time in history that the Australian Teaching Council (1994:7) claims that students will learn at a high level, learn strategies to make learning come alive; it is a time when teachers will promote curiosity, tolerance, honesty, fairness, social diversity and cultural difference, and it is a time when learning communities will work together on teaching policy, curriculum and staff development

(Australian Teaching Council,1994:7). Just as the Australian Teaching Council claims a position in regard to education, so too, parents seek to improve education, to maintain the right to choose children's education, to achieve equity and to uphold their rights as prime educators of their children (Australian Parent Council as cited by Pace, 1994:10).

It is within the extremes, within the search for improved learning opportunities for students, that the International Year of the Family is celebrated and claims made for the recognition of the benefits of the home-school connection which empowers the professional, namely the teacher.

In regard to change at the present time, it is important for:

1. teachers to become familiar with change models in education;
2. teachers to know and understand the positions held by various groups involved in education;
3. teachers' perspectives on the effects of change to be heard, particularly when teachers recognise contrasting emphases which have effects on students' learning.

PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships have been addressed in formal ways, by twinning and compact particularly in USA; they have also been formed by gift, exchange and synergy (Gibbs, Hedge and Clough,1992:83). The last is that for which partners strive for "It involves active involvement, collaboration, and cooperation between parties for neither could achieve on its own' (Gibbs, Hedge and Clough, 1992:83). This is in contrast to the definition by Price (1991:17) where emphasis is on students satisfying work demands through

partnerships which are weighted towards economic issues and competitive markets (Price,1991:17). While partnerships are growing between schools and community groups, including industry, they have not been the norm in the Australian context. Some specific projects in regard to work experience conducted in the Central Highlands Region, Victoria, from 1988, were for gaining a broad view of computer use capabiiities, for writing brief histories, for the production of graphic related presentations, for the investigation of local factors and production processes, for exploration of small business management and for addressing and challenging male/female roles and an awareness of career options in non-traditional fields (Ministry of Education,1989). Currently the use of E Team approach is being widely introduced. Also it is important to be proactive to statements such as those by Drucker (1993:200) which emphasise that schooling will increasingly be a joint venture, in which schools will be partners rather than monopolists and that other institutions will be in competition for the provision of teaching and learning. By contrast, parent associations seek collaboration with teachers, principals and other decisionmaking bodies to maximise students potential (Pace, 1994:9) which includes opportunity for work experience. In partnerships the essential components must be seen as important for the development of students.

The first partnerships between the home and the school begin when the parental contribution to students' learning is recognised prior to the commencement of formal schooling. Teachers affirm the parental contribution to students' learning when they value the care, friendship and respect created in the family; when they recognise that the provision of some of the basic necessities of food, comfort, shelter, security and hard to provide; when they recognise that parents spend more time with their children than

teachers do, when they recognise parents guiding and encouraging children's achievement; when they recognise the opportunities that parents' give their children (McGilp and Michael,1994:40). Parents affirm the school's role when they ensure that children arrive at school on time, when they buy educational games, toys and equipment; they not only organise study time but other learning activities, for example, sport, dancing and music. Parents emphasise the benefits of educational opportunity and encourage children to extend their friendship bonds with school mates beyond the school (McGilp and Michael, 1994:40). The liaison is further built when teachers and parents show genuine respect and understanding for each other. Indeed there must be recognition of the teacher in both the parent and in the professional.

In regard to partnerships it is important for:

1. teachers to understand why partnerships are being formed;
2. teachers to be involved in the building of partnerships;
3. teachers and parents to treasure partnerships which promote the relationship between the school and the home for the good of children.

STUDENTS' LEARNING

Interestingly enough the contribution of the family receives due emphasis by those who recognise its place in students' growth. It was when there was a change in the school population to include 40 percent Vietnamese, 20 percent Filipino, and 20 percent South American that the staff at St Gabriel's Primary School, Reservoir, decided on a new pattern for parent involvement (Hilbert,1994:18). It was a case of holding home-based meetings about such issues such as leaders, school vision and climate, and curriculum. When parents met in the home-based groups, representatives were chosen to form a

school group. Hence, the emphasis is on process for students' benefit (Hilbert,1994:1,18). The Part Program involving the look, say, cover, write and check technique and parents introducing the content of books to students is gaining recognition (Buick,1994:13).

The promotion of parental involvement because of the establishment of different roles , particularly those of instructor, organiser and learner, and because of the provision of training programs (McGilp and Michael,1994) lead to enriched learning experiences in the arts curriculum for students. There were also other benefits of learning in the home, school and community. The intention was to capture the expertise and interests of parents for the provision of different learning opportunities for students. The project as described by McGilp and Michael (1994) also involved artists from the Artists in Schools Program and from the wider community. Roland Harvey as cited by Pace (1994:34-35) has been called 'the thinking artist' for he ' exudes energy and passion exploring ways to encourage children's clear thinking especially in the areas where teaching resources are dry and uninteresting'. In contrast to these is the opportunity for developing students' critical thinking and construction skills; these can be promoted and modelled by parents,and in some cases can be taught by parents. Students need strategies to promote investigating, problemsolving, inquiry and cooperative learning. Slavin (1993:6) emphasises that parents need to be aware of these for achievement differs because of a lack of these in students (Slavin,1993:6); also, schools have little influence independent of a child's background (Slavin,1992:6). The aim is for parents, teachers and students to honour the mutual, collective obligation for students' learning (Caplan, Choy and Whitmore,1992).

An interesting claim is that this has been the decade for enhanced teacher professionalism and empowerment. This supposedly has been achieved to some degree by increased participation in decisionmaking. Decisionmaking is one of the areas receiving attention for parent involvement. Yet, what research has found in schools in America is that teachers claim decision deprivation. The three main areas of decisionmaking studied were decision deprivation, decision equilibrium and decision saturation. The test of relevance (interest) and the test of expertise (knowledge) was applied. While teachers recorded deprivation in the areas of hiring staff, procedures for evaluating teachers, determining organisational and administrative structures, selecting department chairperson and evaluating departments and instructional teams (Rice and Schneider,1994:51), some of these can be areas where some parents might have greater influence than teachers. Rice and Schneider (1994:51) remind that administrators need to heed the warning that they have considerable latitude to involve teachers more before the latter begin to show signs of saturation. In relation to the home-school connection perhaps teachers have to more versed in the structures where parents might have more influence than themselves. Teachers need to know the parameters of authority, the scope of decision and receive adequate feedback (Rice and Schneider,1994:51).

Further emphasising the claim that there is political encouragement for parents to be involved in decisionmaking are McGaw, Piper, Banks and Evans (1993:117). However, they state that when parents were encouraged to give feedback for school advancement, only 37.5 of respondents regarded their involvement in school decisionmaking as important. Stone (1993:117) states the concern that this must raise for the instigators of the Effective Schools Program. In promoting parent involvement in decisionmaking

Stone(1993) claims might reflect 'best hopes rather than descriptions of reality'. Reeve (1993:3-4) supports this idea by stating that the rhetoric for parent participation is so widespread by groups across the broad political spectrum that perhaps it is only a 'slogan system' rather than an indication of an agenda for schools. Soliman (1993:54) claims that anticipation strategies can be used to reform and to defend the existing order. What is important is that consensus by teachers and parents on the goals and processes in education needs to be present. Consensus is more readily achieved between parents and teachers of similar socioeconomic background (Connell et al, 1982; Sharpe,1987; Laureen,1990 as cited by McGaw, Piper, Banks and Evans, 1992:55). Thus, participation for parents is concerned with sharing, not controlling, the decisionmaking process (Stone,1993:55). This is different from consultation where views and opinions are sought and maybe valued, but there is not sharing in the decision making process(Stone, 1993:55) The home and school authorities have the opportunity to address the delicate areas of some determinants of children's learning - social class of children, prior achievement at home and school and the income of parents (Bates,1993:9). However, Wheelwright(1992:8-9) gives a timely reminder of the importance of striving for satisfaction, happiness and human development which are necessities for students in the learning environment, while acknowledging fragmentation, change, isolation, depersonalisation, powerless and normlessness are symbols of loss of community in contemporary life (Soliman,1991:56).

Both parents and teachers can be involved in two particular ways - by sharing intellectual authority and by recognising the role of teacher as learner (Wiske,1994:20). Wiske(1994:39) stresses the importance of dialogue with students in an education and

community change program (Ochoa Elementary School, Tucson, Arizona). For parents and teachers to work together for the betterment of children's learning, information needs to be available on the educational options for students, groups need to debate issues and reach a shared understanding of politics, encouragement needs to be given to voluntary service and decisionmaking processes (Reeve,1993:3-4)

In regard to students' learning it is important for:

1. teachers to clarify the parental contribution to students' learning;
2. teachers to control the extent to which parents are involved in decisionmaking in schools;
3. teachers and parents to share intellectual authority.

VALUE SYSTEMS

In promoting the home-school connection reminders of what constitutes a community school serves as the code for operation. A community school has been defined as one wherein curriculum is adapted to the local region, where there is intensive use of school facilities, parents and citizens help to develop the curriculum and assist with voluntary service, where there are collegial relations and where there are educational activities for people of all ages through cooperation with organisations (Soliman,1991:56). The Schools Commission (1981:164-165) emphasised community development through decentralisation, political devolution and partnership. This was supposedly to support relevant and effective learning programs and greater understanding of the out of school activities. The value was to bridge the home-school gap (Schools Commission, 1987:104).

While the home-school connection is emphasised for the shaping of a better world and society through educational opportunity, difference must be recognised and understood. In an investigation of what stories were told to children by parents of British, Dutch and Italian descent, the following categories were established - stories relating to festival, travel, immigration, war, hardships; stories of national, geographic and family history, and of morals, customs, religion and family relationships. Distinct stories told by the three groups were of hardship for Italians, folk stories by the British and stories of Christmas, Easter and religious festivals by the Dutch (Fox, McGilp, Morris, 1993). What was significant about this study was that the values which parents sought to impart were the ones that children appreciated and the finding that there were prominent values being imparted to Australian Students - those of family solidarity, and national and family heritage (Fox, McGilp, Morris,1993). In a study addressing school climate in schools in regions of Australia and Scotland students were able to identify values which they experienced in their schools - joy, community, peace and justice were experienced by children in Australian schools while Scottish children identified joy, community, peace and challenge (McGilp and Michael, 1993). Australian children spoke of teachers exemplifying justice, peace, joy, community and equality. Scottish students saw teachers as peacemakers and advocates of sincerity, trust and joy (McGilp and Michael, 1993).

It is only when the home and school can emphasise common values that substantiation of school philosophy statements, charters and mission statement accrue meaning. It is when students, teachers and parents actively share and practise the ideals and beliefs of the school that students might be convinced of the strength of the home-school connection.

In regard to values education it is important for:

1. teachers to initiate ways to gain understanding of common values held by families and students;
2. teachers to stipulate the values which are being promoted across the curriculum.
3. Teachers to be involved in research on values in education.

INTERNATIONAL NETWORKING

What can be achieved through international networking is an understanding of what is being undertaken in other countries, the latest developments and knowledge of the successes and difficulties which have occurred.

In Scotland a Parents' Charter (1991) has recently been produced. This charter is seen as giving power to the citizen who has a right to be informed and to choose for themselves in regard to their children's education. The charter has four themes - quality, choice, standards and values - and applies these principles to education in Scotland. McBeth (1993:52) in describing parent - teacher liaison says that on the one hand there is the growing recognition in Europe of the value of parent teacher partnerships in educating children, but on the other hand that the time consuming nature of establishing such is at odds with teachers' conditions of service. Lueder(1993:157) illustrates that the low level of parent involvement is understandable because of three barriers - families feel alienated or 'disconnected' from society as a whole, families are struggling to survive and that some families lack the skills and knowledge to become involved.

Confusion arises from the complex realities of the 1990's for values are often equated

with prices or profits and are subordinated to economics (Gleeson, 1994). Gleeson (1994) stresses positive values for which communities must strive - respect for life, celebration of families, fidelity and commitment to truth and justice. Many of these are the real values which are the emphases of school vision statements. Lueder (1993:159) suggests creating learning environments where the family, school and community work together(159) and wherein the school plays the roles of Connector, Communicator, Broker and Coach (161).

The Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning at Johns Hopkins University , Washington, is one influential organisation that encourages international networking.

In regard to international networking it is important for:

1. teachers to write about what they are achieving in their particular regions;
2. teachers to share their understanding of the influences on families and schools;
3. teachers to form links with other teachers.

In this article many issues, particularly those relating to the home-school connection, have been raised. Emphases has been given to ways in which the home-school connection can empower the teacher and the teaching profession. Teachers must be proactive to change and its many influences on education, must study and initiate partnerships which enhance students' learning, need to know what values are held by parents and students and publicise the values underpinning curriculum, and, be catalysts for networking which keeps them abreast of educational advancement.

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